



## Helpdesk Research Report

# Regional progress of the world's girls and women

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## Question

Please summarise the regional progress of girls and women, highlighting overall regional progress and disparities, progress and trends in key areas (preferably in table format), and emerging regional priorities for multilaterals.

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## 1. Overview

This report provides an overview of regional progress on gender equality, based on recent regional reviews and monitoring data.

As the world's poorest region, **Sub-Saharan Africa** is performing poorly on many gender equality indicators. For example, it has the highest rates of maternal and newborn mortality, and also the lowest proportion of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel. Nearly half of all births here (and in South Asia) took place without skilled birth attendance in 2012 (UN Women, 2015, p. 17). On other indicators, this region has made the most progress, because it had the worst conditions to begin with. For example, over the past two decades, the region has achieved a large increase in youth literacy, but still a smaller proportion of its young women and men are able to read and write than in any other region (UNESCO, 2015). Although progress has been made on increasing women's political participation, including the (re-) election of Africa's first female presidents, progress on women's economic empowerment has been slower and women remain restricted from benefiting from economic growth (UNECA, 2014).

**Latin America and the Caribbean** is the world's most unequal region and there are large inequities between social groups, including between men and women. Nevertheless, progress has been made in

expanding girls' access to education and in legislation to protect women's equality, often as part of wider constitutional reform processes (EIU, 2012). Some countries have legalised marriage equality and same-sex civil unions. All of this points to a cultural shift away from discrimination that has been spearheaded by women's social movements (ECLAC, 2015). This region has done particularly well in institutionalising national gender machineries and on incorporating a gender perspective into budgeting (ibid). Although many countries in Latin America have quota laws to promote the participation of women in decision-making, the same has not occurred in the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2015). Women are still discriminated against in paid work, but they are starting to enter high paid sectors in parts of Latin America (ibid). There are vast discrepancies in literacy between rural and urban women (ibid).

Every country in **Europe and Central Asia** improved its score on the Women's Opportunity Index between 2010-2012 (EIU, 2012). This region performs best on all measures of gender equality. Particular progress has been made in developing legislation and setting up national gender mechanisms, increasing women's access to higher education, and civil society development (ECE, 2014). Nevertheless, in parts of the region, rising conservatism threatens these gains (ibid). Violence against women is widely criminalised but new opportunities for women's exploitation are opening up online.

In the **Middle East and North Africa**, high reproductive rates, discriminatory social norms and laws designed to 'protect' women restrict their freedom, mobility and economy opportunity. Women are disadvantaged in the workplace and little value is attached to their invisible household work. Social and cultural norms mean that cases of violence against women rarely reach court (EIU, 2012). Some Arab states have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), others have not (ESCWA, 2015, p. 4). Girls' net enrolment has increased in most countries but more effort is needed to address the problem of school drop outs. There has been little progress on criminalising domestic violence, especially where much-needed legislation conflicts with religious-based legislation (ESCWA, 2015). Nevertheless, violence against women is receiving more media attention, which may eventually pressure governments to change (ibid).

**Southern Asia** has performed worse than any other region on a number of gender indicators. Women are often restricted from working outside the home, and female labour participation is particularly low at between 29-30 per cent (EIU, 2012, p. 18). Southern Asia together with Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 86 per cent of all maternal deaths in 2013 (UN Women, 2015, p. 16). Nevertheless, this region made the most progress on the gender parity index in primary enrolment. Still, net primary and secondary school enrolment were modest in 1995 and remain extremely low. Child marriage has declined for marriages involving girls under 15 (UN, 2015).

Several countries in **Eastern Asia** are performing well and improving their scores on the Women's Opportunity Index<sup>1</sup>. The female labour force participation rate in this region is relatively high at 64 per cent (EIU, 2012, p. 18). Women are more likely than men to be engaged in vulnerable employment and are more likely to be contributing family workers (particularly in both South and South-West Asia and in South-East Asia) (UNESCAP, 2014b).

All countries in the **Pacific** region perform below the global average on gender indicators. The overwhelming proportion of the population lives in rural, isolated villages, and has limited access to basic health and education services (EIU, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia are the top scorers in the region

## 2. Table of progress on key priorities by region

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Between 2000 and 2012 primary enrolment doubled from 62 million to 149 million and Sub-Saharan Africa's gender parity index is 0.92 (UNECA, 2014, p. 6).</li> <li>Nevertheless, more than half of all countries with remaining gender disparity in primary school enrolment in 2012 are in Sub-Saharan Africa. Economic Intelligence Unit data from 2012 suggested some countries in this region have made very little progress, or even regressed, in improving girl's learning (EIU, 2012, p. 13) <sup>2</sup>.</li> <li>Across the region, male literacy (68 per cent) is significantly higher than female literacy (51 per cent) (UNECA, 2014, p. 7).</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual and reproductive health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Maternal Mortality Rate fell by 49 per cent since 1995, though it remains higher here than in any other region (UN, 2015, p. 38).</li> <li>There has been only a small increase in women receiving antenatal care over the last two decades, from 47 per cent in 1990, to 49 per cent in 2014 (UN, 2015, p. 41). Around 52 per cent of births are attended by skilled health personnel.</li> <li>There are large discrepancies between rural and urban areas. Central, Eastern and Western Africa have particularly poor rural maternal health services. In Central Africa there is 52 per cent less coverage in rural areas than in urban areas – in other words, rural women are half as likely to have access to skilled birth attendance as urban women.</li> <li>The most notable increase was in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it more than doubled between 1990 and 2015, from 13 per cent to 28 per cent (UN, 2015, p. 41). However, progress in reducing adolescent childbearing has been slow in Sub-Saharan Africa.</li> <li>Child marriage is most common in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The 10 countries with the highest prevalence rates are in these two regions.<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Women's economic empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some progress has been made in creating new economic opportunities for women, particularly the development of schemes that support entrepreneurship and access to credit (UNECA, 2014, p. 8).</li> <li>The gender gap in employment is lowest in sub-Saharan Africa, where agriculture employs two-thirds of men and women. Nevertheless this is often low-value, low productivity work (EIU, 2012, p. 13)</li> <li>Whereas globally women earn on average 24 per cent less than men, in sub-Saharan Africa they earn 30 per cent less (UN, 2015, p. 30).</li> </ul>
<b>Violence against women and girls</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New legal frameworks have been established at the regional level to advance women's rights and gender equality. These include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), and the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2011) (UN Women, 2014). Nevertheless law enforcement is very weak (UNECA, 2014).</li> <li>Prevalence data is currently limited and not tracked over time but one study showed that intimate partner violence of a physical nature</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> South Africa, Madagascar, Zambia, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Nigeria and Ethiopia have made little improvement.

<sup>3</sup> Nepal, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guinea, India, Central African Republic, Mali, Chad, Bangladesh, Niger

	had the following prevalence rates: Central Africa: 66 per cent; West Africa: 41.8 per cent; East Africa: 38.8 per cent; Southern Africa: 29.7 per cent (UNECA, 2014, p. 22). Responses to protecting victims remain limited, particularly financial support, and are restricted mainly to urban areas (ibid).
<b>Enabling environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sub-Saharan Africa has made the most substantial progress in increasing women’s parliamentary representation, from 9.7 per cent in 1995 to 24 per cent in 2014 (UN Women, 2015, p. 30). Data has not been rigorously collected on women’s participation in other aspects of public life, such as local government, public administration or civil society (UN Women, 2015).</li> <li>▪ Contradictions between statutory, customary and religious laws obstruct the advancement of women, particularly in land ownership (UNECA, 2014). Discriminatory family laws remain prevalent across the region (EIU, 2012; UN Women, 2015, p. 37).</li> </ul>
<b>LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN</b>	
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Women living in rural areas have limited access to education and the illiteracy rate among rural women is 66 per cent higher on average than among urban women (ECLAC, 2015, p. 45).</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual and reproductive health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Adolescent fertility rates are not falling and have even climbed in some countries for low-income, less-educated teenagers (ECLAC, 2015).</li> <li>▪ Legislation upholding reproductive rights has expanded, and there is increased availability of contraceptives. Some countries in the region still prohibit abortion in all circumstances (ECLAC, 2015).</li> </ul>
<b>Women’s economic empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The ratio of women to men in poor households increased from 108 women for every 100 men in 1997 to 117 women for every 100 men in 2012, despite declining poverty rates for the whole region (UN, 2015, p. 8).</li> <li>▪ The economic participation rate of urban women has been moderately increasing, but remains well below that of men (76.9 per cent compared to 52.9 per cent in 2012) (ECLAC, 2015, p. 37)</li> <li>▪ In every country in the region, women spend at least twice as much time in unpaid work as men (ECLAC, 2015, p. 38).</li> </ul>
<b>Violence against women and girls</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rates of sexual and physical violence are two to three times higher among women who have their first child before 17 years of age than for women who become first-time mothers after 25 years of age (ECLAC, 2015, p. 53)</li> <li>▪ Latin America has made progress in legislation against violence toward women. All but two countries, Bolivia and Ecuador, have perfect scores in enacting laws against domestic abuse, and all are signatories to the Belem do Para Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (EIU, 2012)</li> </ul>
<b>Enabling environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ National gender machineries are rising in the hierarchy of the executive (ECLAC, 2015, p. 26)</li> </ul>

<b>MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)</b>	
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Girls' net enrolment varies widely across the region, from 47 per cent in Djibouti to 100 per cent in Oman and Bahrain (ESCWA, 2015, p. 7).</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual and reproductive health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The region has made the fastest progress in reducing child marriage. The percentage of women married before age 18 has dropped by about half, from 34 per cent to 18 per cent, over the last three decades.</li> <li>Most countries in the region had a maternal mortality ratio of below 100 in 2013, but conflict-affected countries fare much worse (ESCWA, 2015, p. 8).</li> </ul>
<b>Women's economic empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Female participation in the labour force is especially low in North Africa. This region has the lowest rate of female labour participation globally (EIU, 2012).</li> <li>The gap between women's and men's labour force participation is greatest in the region (UN Women, 2015, p. 26). As of 2012, no country in the region had a female labour participation rate above 50 per cent (EIU, 2012, p. 14).</li> </ul>
<b>Violence against women and girls</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are no reliable statistics on prevalence rates, but there is reportedly now greater media awareness, some new facilities to care for victims, and improved judicial handling of cases in some countries (ESCWA, 2015).</li> </ul>
<b>Enabling environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discriminatory family laws remain prevalent and these disadvantage women in land ownership, access to work, and freedom from violence (EIU, 2012; UN Women, 2015, p. 37).</li> </ul>
<b>EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA</b>	
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Every country in the region improved its score on education and training for women and girls between 2010-2012 (EIU, 2012, p. 17).</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual and reproductive health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sexual and reproductive health information and health services are uneven, and access to comprehensive sexuality education is limited (ECE, 2014)</li> </ul>
<b>Women's economic empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women's labour participation has increased, but women are more often found in precarious or part-time employment, receive lower pensions, and undertake a larger portion of unpaid care work than men (ECE, 2014)</li> </ul>
<b>Violence against women and girls</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender-based violence is widely criminalised and public acceptance of it has declined, but it nevertheless continues and cyberstalking is increasing (ECE, 2014).</li> </ul>
<b>Enabling environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal restrictions on women's property rights have been removed (EIU, 2012).</li> </ul>
<b>SOUTHERN AND EASTERN ASIA</b>	
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Southern Asia made the most progress in achieving gender parity in primary and secondary enrolment. This region had the lowest score on the gender parity index for primary enrolment in 1990 (0.74). By 2015, however, it had achieved a score of 1.03 (UN, 2015, p. 29).</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual and reproductive health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The maternal mortality ratio declined most rapidly in Southern Asia, where it fell by 64 per cent between 1990 and 2013 (UN, 2015, p. 38).</li> <li>The latest available figures suggest that Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa account for the vast majority of maternal deaths globally (around 86 per cent in 2013) (UN, 2015, p. 39).</li> <li>Progress in increasing the number of women receiving the recommended 4 antenatal visits during pregnancy has been slow, particularly in Southern Asia where it remains the lowest in the world, at 36 per cent.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Globally there has been only a modest trend towards fewer adolescent births. A considerable amount of progress appears to have been made in South Asia over the same period (UN, 2015, p. 42).</li> <li>▪ In South Asia, the decline in child marriage has been especially marked for marriages involving girls under age 15, dropping from 32 per cent to 17 per cent; the marriage of girls under age 18, however, is still commonplace.</li> </ul>
<b>Women's economic empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Women's participation in the labour force is one quarter to one third that of men's participation (UN, 2015, p. 30).</li> <li>▪ Women earn 33 per cent less than men (UN, 2015, p. 30).</li> </ul>
<b>Violence against women and girls</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Normative frameworks, programmes and public campaigns to eliminate violence against women and girls (VAWG) are valuable but inadequate, given persistently high rates of violence and apparent impunity for some perpetrators (UNESCAP, 2014b)</li> </ul>
<b>Enabling environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Discriminatory family laws remain prevalent and these disadvantage women in land ownership (EIU, 2012; UN Women, 2015, p. 37).</li> </ul>
<b>PACIFIC</b>	
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Primary and secondary school enrolment and attendance are uneven across the region.</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual and reproductive health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Women, on average, live longer lives than men, but continue to die during childbirth, have unmet health-related needs, such as in relation to sexual and reproductive health and HIV services, and do not universally enjoy the ability to choose or access health services (UNESCAP, 2014b).</li> </ul>
<b>Women's economic empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Pacific Islands are among the lowest scorers on women's property ownership and access to finance. They are also among the worst performers on the implementation and enforcement of equal pay for equal work (EIU, 2012).</li> </ul>
<b>Violence against women and girls</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Legislation to prevent violence against women is weak and domestic abuse is pervasive and persistent (EIU, 2012).</li> </ul>
<b>Enabling environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ UNESCAP reported some progress on the introduction of family protection acts, family safety acts and domestic violence acts, along with criminal, civil and family codes, legislation against violence against women and girls (UNESCAP, 2014b).</li> </ul>

### 3. Table of selected regional indicators<sup>4</sup>

PRIORITY AREA	Indicator (+source)	Sub-Saharan Africa	North Africa	South Asia	East Asia	Western Asia	South-East Asia	Caucasus and Central Asia	Latin America and Caribbean	Oceania
<b>Education</b>	Gender parity index for gross enrolment ratios in primary education in 2011 ( <i>UNESCO, 2015, p. 33</i> )	0.92	0.93 (Arab States)	1.00	0.99	1.00	-	0.99	0.97	0.99
<b>Economic empowerment</b>	% share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector in 2015 ( <i>UN, 2015, p. 30</i> )	34	19	21	43	21	39	44	45	39
	Labour force participation rate, female and (male) 2013 ( <i>UN Women, 2015, p. 26</i> )	64 (77)	22 (75) MENA	30 (80)	62 (79) East Asia + Pacific	-	-	50 (69)	54 (80)	-
<b>Violence against girls and women</b>	Lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence (physical and/or sexual) or non-partner sexual violence or both among all women (15 years and older) by WHO region 2010 ( <i>WHO, 2013, p. 27</i> )	45.6 (Africa)		40.2 (South-East Asia)		-	-	-	36.1 (Americas)	27.9 (Western Pacific)
<b>Sexual and reproductive health and rights</b>	Maternal mortality ratio 2013 (and % reduction since 1990) ( <i>UN, 2015, p. 38</i> )	510 (↓49%)	69 (↓57%)	190 (↓64%)	33 (↓65%)	74 (↓43%)	140 (↓57%)	39 (↓44%)	77 (↓40%)	190 (↓51%)
	Percentage of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel in 2014 (comparative data from 1990) ( <i>UN, 2015, p. 39</i> )	52 (43)	90 (47)	52 (32)	100 (94)	86 (62)	82 (49)	96 (97)	92 (81)	-

<sup>4</sup> Note that the regional categorisation used here mirrors MDG monitoring data, but regional classifications vary across reports.

PRIORITY AREA	Indicator (+source)	Sub-Saharan Africa	North Africa	South Asia	East Asia	Western Asia	South-East Asia	Caucasus and Central Asia	Latin America and Caribbean	Oceania
	Proportion of women given four or more antenatal visits during pregnancy in 2014 ( <i>UN, 2015, p. 41</i> )	49	89	36	-	-	84	-	97	-
	Number of births to women aged 15-19 2015 (comparative data from 1990), per 1000 women ( <i>UN, 2015, p. 42</i> )	116 (123)	38 (42)	47 (88)	6 (15)	45 (63)	44 (54)	32 (45)	73 (86)	53 (84)
	Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union before age 18 ( <i>UNICEF, 2014, p. 2</i> )	38 (Eastern + Southern) 46 (West + central)	24 MENA	56	--	-	-	-	30	-
<b>Enabling environment</b>	% countries with equal inheritance laws (sons and daughters) in 2010 ( <i>UN Women, 2014, p. 31</i> )	70	0	33	85	-	-	-	100	-
	Proportion of seats held by women in single or lower houses of national parliament in 2015 ( <i>UN, 2015, p. 31</i> )	23	25	18	22	12	18	18	27	4.4



## 4. Emerging regional priorities for multilaterals

Regional priorities are wide-ranging but recent regional reports highlight the following:

**Sub-Saharan Africa:** One of the key emerging priorities for African states identified through the Beijing+20 review process was the creation of public policies that support women's access to, and control over economic opportunities. These policies will particularly need to respond to/support:

- industrialisation, including creating opportunities for women to fully participate in value chains in the productive sectors
- regional integration, to boost women's cross-border trade
- entrepreneurship, in the face of rising unemployment, more effort is being put into training, skills programmes, and entrepreneurship
- the building of nation-wide and community resilience to shocks, including strengthening the role of women in responding to food insecurity (UNECA, 2014, pp. 40-41).

At a more general level, the regional focus is on enhancing non-discriminatory legal frameworks in all spheres of women's lives (economic, political, social and cultural); expanding economic opportunities for women by providing gender-responsive sector-specific support services in business, agriculture, the extractive industry; strengthening women's agency by building women's ability to identify and act on economic, social and political opportunities; and challenging harmful social and cultural norms that impede their ability to fully participate and benefit from Africa's economic growth (UNECA, 2014, pp. 40-43). Greater investment in antenatal care and provision of skilled birth attendants is needed, given the negative correlation with maternal morbidity and mortality (UN, 2015).

**Latin America and the Caribbean:** Population and economic growth will drive a rapid expansion in demand for energy, water, minerals and food in the decades ahead. Quota laws have been crucial in expanding women's political participation, but there is a need for proper enforcement in case of violations. There is also a need to strengthen statistical systems by incorporating a gender focus and national laws and plans on equality. Public policies in the labour sphere must now focus on improving access, generating equal pay, and ensuring the right to a pension. Policies must also redistribute time and work (paid and unpaid) between men and women and assign caretaking responsibilities more equitably (ECLAC, 2015).

**Middle East and North Africa:** Regional priorities identified through the Beijing+20 process focused on four areas (ESCWA, 2015). First, the region needs to improve its official frameworks and institutions. This includes addressing gaps in coordination between the various bodies concerned with women's issues; improving data collection; speeding up the incorporation of gender issues in public policy, legislation and budgets; and providing more funding and human resources for this purpose. Second, the region needs to improve women's socio-economic empowerment. Priorities include diversifying training for women, and opening up more opportunities for small enterprise. Third, more needs to be done to protect women from violent practices. Criminalising domestic violence and 'honour' crimes, training law enforcement officers in gender awareness, and collecting better data are all key. Finally, there has to be an emphasis on knowledge, cultural development and media empowerment. One of the central

challenges faced by women and girls in the region is the patriarchal culture and media that promote stereotypical images of women and addressing this is crucial (ESCWA, 2015).

**Europe and Central Asia:** The issue of the gender pay gap and the need to re-distribute the burden of unpaid care work features high on priorities for this region. More data is needed, especially to reveal wage differences in companies as well as mechanisms to address equal pay remuneration for work of equal value (ECE, 2014). In addition, more could be done to improve the participation of women in decision-making bodies (EIU, 2012). Legislative quotas may be considered (ECE, 2014). The region needs to continue to build capacities for implementation of its gender laws, and improve media monitoring (ECE, 2014). The scale of transformation requires government, the private sector and civil society to work together. There is also a need to expand access to sexual and reproductive health information and health services, and strengthen access to comprehensive sexuality education (ibid).

**Southern Asia and Pacific:** There is a need for greater investment in antenatal care and provision of skilled birth attendants, given the negative correlation with maternal morbidity and mortality (UN, 2015). Low female literacy rates, poverty, and limited access to both health professionals and health facilities underlie the high maternal mortality rates and need to be addressed (UNESCAP, 2014b).

Other priority areas for action identified by the ESCAP member states in the Beijing+20 review include women's engagement in public and political life, women's economic empowerment and the elimination of violence against women and girls (UNESCAP, 2014b).

Among the priorities identified were the revision, adoption and enforcement of legislation that mandates equality of rights and opportunities for women and men; allocation of resources for women's economic empowerment and decent work; implementation of measures that encourage "balance" between working life and family life. In education, challenges include the lack of trained teachers and greater resources for school infrastructure and transportation, and the need to eliminate social norms that underlie subject streaming and low completion rates among girls (UNESCAP, 2014b). There is also a need for greater adoption of work-life balance initiatives, provision of accessible and affordable childcare services and universal access to basic services (UNESCAP, 2014a).

Overall, government cooperation and partnerships with civil society, women's organisations and research institutions, and the private sector are considered key to accelerated action in this region (UNESCAP, 2014b).

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## Further information

See related report: Mcloughlin, C. (2015). *Global progress of the world's girls and women* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1283). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham  
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